

Applying community capacity-building approaches to child welfare practice and policy

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Can insights from the field of community capacity-building improve child welfare practice and policy in Australia? This paper explores this question by outlining the concept of community capacity, and uses real-life examples to illustrate the ways in which service providers might apply community capacity-building approaches in their work with children and families.

KEY MESSAGES

- It is increasingly recognised that the welfare of children and families cannot be separated from the health of the community in which they live.
- However, much child welfare practice focuses on individual children and families, with limited resources or capacity devoted to influencing the structural, community-level factors that impact on children's welfare.
- Community capacity-building is an approach that attempts to increase a given community's capacity to solve collective problems. It aims for "grassroots", "bottom-up", and sustainable solutions to problems.
- The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020 and the Communities for Children initiative incorporate some of the principles of community capacity-building approaches.
- There are many examples of individual service providers who have strengthened community capacity through their work with children and families. This paper provides examples of such practices, in the hope of inspiring innovative approaches to child and family welfare practice and policy in Australia.

Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that the welfare of children and families cannot be separated from the health of the community in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Edwards & Bromfield, 2009). For instance, high levels of child abuse within a community have been shown to be associated

with a poor sense of community identity (Wright, 2004). Similarly, the vulnerability of children in socially isolated families has been linked to the strength of the family's support networks within their community (Wright, 2004). In a number of ways, the health of families and the health of the communities in which they live are inseparable.

However, one of the recurrent criticisms of child welfare and child protection practice¹ is that it is dominated by a "risk management paradigm", in which the focus is on mitigating risk to individual children or families (Barter, 2006). Too often, those working towards the welfare of children are made to lurch from one family-in-crisis to the next, with limited resources or capacity to influence the structural, community-level factors that impact on children's welfare.

The crisis-driven nature of much child welfare practice can also limit opportunities for new and innovative thinking (Head, 2008). Yet innovative approaches to policy and practice are exactly what are needed in the child welfare sector, where many of the problems faced by service users are complex and intractable and persist despite the sector's best efforts at addressing them (Head, 2008).

One way to stimulate new thinking about old problems is to approach them from different angles, such as using frameworks and tools from other fields of research. The purpose of this paper is to do just that—to stimulate fresh ideas by applying ideas from the "community capacity-building" approach to child welfare practice and policy in Australia. This paper does not attempt to provide a definitive or comprehensive account of this topic. Rather, it is designed to encourage managers, individual practitioners, and policy-makers to reflect upon their work using concepts to which they may not have had much exposure.

This paper approaches the community capacity-building literature in three ways:

- The first is to briefly explain community capacity-building approaches, identifying underlying principles and how community capacity can be measured.
- The second is to demonstrate how community capacity-building has already informed certain child welfare initiatives in Australia (e.g., activities under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children and Communities for Children).
- The third is to demonstrate the ways in which some Australian service providers and practitioners have strengthened community capacity through their work with children and families.

Defining "community"

Community can be defined in many ways. It can denote those who live in a specific region, those who share certain characteristics (e.g., cultural history, religious belief), and those who come together through shared interests or concerns (Maguire & Cartwright, 2008). Communities can be located within a bound physical space or geographically dispersed, as with online or virtual communities (Porter, 2004). The word community can even be used to describe a feeling of connection, reciprocity and positive interaction, as in the statement "a real sense of community has developed".

What's more, families and individuals can belong to multiple communities, such as belonging to a local sporting club while sitting on the local environmental advocacy group. They can move among different communities at different times, such as the transition from primary school to high school. Parents may also travel to other communities to work, socialise or to take their children to day-care services and may not have a close connection with their own local community.

For the purposes of this paper, a community can be thought of as "any existing or potential network of individuals, groups and organisations that share or have the potential to share common concerns, interests and goals" (Bush & Dower, 2003).

¹ In this paper, the terms "child welfare" and "child and family welfare" are generally used interchangeably, and refer broadly to those sectors that work for the wellbeing of children and families. Although child protection services are no doubt part of child welfare sector, it is likely that unique issues will be raised when a community capacity-building approach is applied to child protection policy and practice (e.g., the tension between intervening in family life on the one hand, and building trust and capacity on the other). These more specific issues are largely beyond the scope of this paper. Despite this, it is believed that practitioners and policy-makers working in the child protection sector can still benefit from the broad aims and messages of this paper.

Understanding community capacity-building

Defining community capacity-building

At the most basic level, community capacity-building approaches attempt to increase a given community's capacity to solve its collective problems. Although the term "community capacity-building" is used in a wide range of social, economic and environmental policy contexts, there is still disagreement over how best to define it (Noya, Clarence, & Craig, 2009).

In the context of socio-economic development, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) considers community capacity-building as a:

... process of enabling those living in poverty to develop skills and competencies, knowledge, structures, and strengths, so as to become more strongly involved in community, as well as wider societal life, and to take greater control of their own lives and that of their communities. (Noya et al., 2009 p. 16)

In a child and family welfare context (which is the context most relevant to this paper), Chaskin (2009) described "community capacity" as:

... the interaction of human capital, organisational resources, and social capital that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and to improve or maintain the well-being of a given community. (p. 34)

Despite differences in definition, a number of key observations can be made about community capacity-building:

- Key objectives include to strengthen *community identity* and a sense of belonging among community members; to *build frameworks* that can facilitate sustainable change; and to *empower communities* to address their own concerns.
- Community capacity-building can be considered either as a process, a practice, an organising principle, or as an objective, and can be all of these things at once.
- In a child and family welfare context, the key purpose of community capacity-building is to strengthen communities as a protective and nurturing entity for children and families.
- *Context* is a primary factor in community capacity-building approaches (Chaskin, 2009). For this reason, it is difficult to provide a universal understanding without due regard to the particular characteristics of a given community.
- The notions of community capacity-building, "community development", "community mobilisation" and "community strengthening", along with a range of other associated idioms are distinct concepts and there remains some disagreement about how they should be defined or understood.² However, such terms can be understood as part of broader community capacity-building approaches.
- Community capacity-building approaches are often targeted at the most vulnerable groups in a community (Chaskin, 2009). However, they can help to build strong, cohesive communities for the benefit of all groups in a community.

Principles of community capacity-building

Another way to understand community capacity-building is to identify the key principles or philosophies that underlie it. The following six principles have been drawn from an analysis of the community capacity-building literature. It should be noted that these principles are interconnected, and should not be considered in isolation—the absence of any one principle may undermine the effectiveness of community capacity-building efforts to produce positive outcomes for communities.

² For further information about how these concepts are understood, see Atkinson and Willis (2006), Smith, Littlejohns, and Thompson (2001), and Traveso-Yepex, Maddalena, Bavington, and Donovan (2012).

1. Focus on community needs

Understanding the collective needs of families is central to any community capacity-building approach. The degree and complexity of family needs will differ from one family to the next, although some needs may be shared more broadly among the community, such as in remote communities where families have difficulty accessing services and/or resources (Scougal, 2008c).

Collective community needs will be influenced to varying degrees by the changing political, social and economic conditions of that community (Bell, Elliott, & Simmons, 2010; Jackson et al., 2003; Noya et al., 2009). Services may not have the power or resources to influence many of these conditions, yet a focus on the needs of particular families can allow services to identify how families might be better equipped to solve their own problems (Dower & Bush, 2003).

Client-focused or family-centred services embody the needs-based approach (Community Matters, 2012). By consulting directly with program participants and other community members about their needs, practitioners can better understand where to invest their resources and to what degree families might require their support.

2. "Bottom-up" or "grassroots" practice

Successful capacity-building initiatives are largely driven by communities from the bottom up, where local people are free to decide how best to address the issues that concern them (Atkinson, 2006; Centre for Community Child Health [CCCH], 2012). For this reason, family and community engagement is a key element for services to identify and respond to community issues.

Investments from government agencies and other organisations from outside the local community are important to community capacity in terms of providing resources, advice and information (Dower & Bush, 2003). However, central to community capacity-building approaches is the ability of the community to exercise its own decisions about how such investments are applied (Bell et al., 2010).

3. Strengths-based approach

Community capacity-building requires an understanding of a community's collective strengths and how they may be used to address community challenges (Stewart, Lohar, & Higgins, 2011). Services can contribute to this by harnessing and building upon the talents and contributions of individuals and families so that these community members can be better equipped to respond to their own issues. In doing so, the collective strengths of families can empower communities to provide local solutions to the community's own unique concerns (Haswell-Elkins et al., 2009; Leigh, 2008; Stewart et al., 2011).

4. Inclusive practice

In a community capacity-building context, "inclusion" refers to the process of partnering with as many community members and organisations as possible to work together to achieve common goals. Involving a broad range of relevant sectors and stakeholders aims to provide partners with access to resources and to stimulate further action on a community's behalf (Bell et al., 2010). However, it is the genuine participation of community members in the planning, delivery and evaluation of projects that is central to these approaches. Furthermore, community participants will ideally be included from the very start of the collaborations and should feel a sense of ownership over the decisions they make (Atkinson & Willis, 2006; Bell et al., 2010; Dower & Bush, 2003; Noya et al., 2009).

5. Investment in community capacity

Strategies to build community capacity require an appropriate degree of investment. This includes investment into a community's infrastructure, including a community's political, financial and social structures (Bush & Dower, 2002b; Dower & Bush, 2003). However, investments must also extend beyond the infrastructural elements of a community, so that they can resonate at the service

delivery level. For example, resources are required to improve or implement the capacity of service networks, including strategic capacity, project design and management capabilities (“upstream” capacity-building). At the service delivery level (“downstream” capacity), investments are required to facilitate networking and information transfer, education and training for staff, and the provision of opportunities to engage families with services and programs (Bell et al., 2010; Chaskin, 2009; Dower & Bush, 2003; Funnell, Rogers, & Scougall, 2004; Noya et al. 2009).

6. Aim for sustainability

The aim of community capacity-building frameworks is to achieve *sustainable* change for the benefit of all families and groups living in a community. To achieve this, services must seek ways to sustain their own capacity (service capacity) so that they can continue to work with families to help them address their immediate needs. While service capacity is critical, the ultimate aim of community capacity-building approaches is for services to build the capacity of families (family capacity) to the degree that families have the confidence to address their own concerns in the longer term (Bell et al., 2010).

Adequate time and resources are required to enable community services to access ongoing support from existing community networks, whether they be from informal networks such as mothers’ clubs, scouts or networks that promote civic engagement, or from formal support networks (who can receive referrals or refer their clients to other relevant services). Emerging or newly created services that have already demonstrated positive outcomes in other communities will also be a source of support for the community (Atkinson & Willis, 2006; Stewart et al., 2011). By enlisting the support of other agencies, services can pass on a range of knowledge and expertise to families so that their problem-solving capacities can be enhanced in the longer term. (Bell et al., 2010; Dower & Bush, 2003).

Services that use the community support network to establish advocacy and/or ongoing political support on behalf of the community are also more likely to sustain community capacity over time (Bell et al., 2010). If flexible systems are in place to accommodate ongoing refinements to service delivery and/or service policies, services will be better placed to respond to changing community needs (Bell et al., 2010; CCCH, 2012). This might be achieved by embedding client-focused evaluation and assessment into the organisational structures of service agencies as part of a continual loop of program refinement (Bell et al., 2010; CCCH, 2012; Dower & Bush, 2003).

Above all, a long-term commitment to the shared goal of protecting and nurturing children is required from each and every supporting partner in a community network (CCCH, 2012, p. 17). Such a commitment requires various degrees of investment from community partners.

Measuring community capacity

A number of tools have been developed to measure the capacity of communities (for review, see: Liberato, Brimblecombe, Ritchie, Ferguson, & Coveney, 2011). Such measurement tools can help policy-makers and service providers to identify the degree of investment that is required to strengthen community capacity.

The Community Capacity Index (the Index) is a popular example of a measurement tool that has been developed in an Australian context. It was devised to improve the ability to recognise, evaluate and address key problems within a community in order to produce improved public health outcomes in the longer term (Bush, Dower, & Mutch, 2002b; Dower & Bush, 2003).

The Index focuses on the organisational aspects of community capacity at a systemic level (i.e., how agencies work together to formulate policies, build access to resources and develop needs-based services) and uses four domains to indicate a community’s capacity: *network partnerships*, *knowledge transfer*, *problem solving* and *infrastructure* (these domains are discussed in the section “Building Community Capacity Through Working With Children and Families”).

In acknowledging the limited capacity³ of services to conduct assessments of community capacity, this paper encourages services to use the Index as a way to identify how their existing services might already be strengthening communities while considering how community capacity-building approaches might help to refine their future practices.

How have community capacity-building approaches already influenced the child welfare sector in Australia?

Many of the ideas of community capacity-building have already found their way into child welfare and child protection practice and policy in Australia. For example, the idea of adopting a strengths-based approach to child and family welfare is currently very popular among service providers. This section outlines two of the overarching policy initiatives that clearly include elements of community capacity-building: the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020 (The National Framework) and Communities for Children (CfC). It is difficult to say whether these frameworks were directly (rather than indirectly) influenced by community capacity-building approaches. However, it is clear that a collaborative, community-driven focus is seen by governments to benefit not just vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families, but all families living in their respective communities.

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children

The National Framework, endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in April 2009, is a long-term national approach to enhance the safety and wellbeing of Australia's children. It seeks to provide a foundation for national reform to reduce child abuse and neglect, and is underpinned by an assertion that children have the right to live in a safe family and community environment (COAG, 2009; Lohar, 2012).

Other features of the National Framework include:

- A focus on delivering a more integrated and enhanced service system using a public health model approach.⁴
- An emphasis on increasing the level of collaboration between Australian, state and territory governments and non-government organisations to help protect children. This recognises the key role of the non-government sector in helping to strengthen communities.
- Endorsement of a high-level outcome that “Australia's children and young people are safe and well” through six “supporting outcomes”. Two supporting outcomes focus on the communities in which children live in recognition of the lasting impact that communities can have on the safety and wellbeing of children.
- The aim to provide both universal support and services to help all families raise their children, and a range of targeted early intervention services to support vulnerable and at-risk families and children (COAG, 2009).

The National Framework also emphasises the need for *evidence-based* policies and interventions. For example, to ensure all children and families receive appropriate support and services to create the conditions for safety and care (supporting outcome 2), the National Framework draws upon national and international research (COAG, 2009). This research closely reflects some of the principles identified in the community capacity-building literature (outlined above), as illustrated in Table 1.

³ Services may be limited in their capacity to conduct assessments of community capacity as their role is often to focus specifically on delivering outcomes for children and families more directly, rather than on contributing to community development initiatives.

⁴ Under a public health model, priority is placed on having universal supports available for all families (e.g., health and education). More intensive (secondary) prevention interventions are provided to those families that need additional assistance with a focus on early intervention. Tertiary child protection services are a last resort, and the least desirable option for families and governments (COAG, 2009, p. 7).

Table 1: Elements of the National Framework and the principles of community capacity-building

The National Framework (COAG, 2009)	Principle of community capacity-building
Children and their families have the right to participate in decisions affecting them (Australia’s obligation as a signatory to the UN Convention)	Reflects <i>bottom-up</i> and <i>inclusive</i> approaches to child welfare and protection
Provide the right supports at the right time, such as the provision of services early in a child’s life and/or early in the life of a problem	Reflects a focus on family/community <i>needs</i>
Recognise that families have strengths that can be built upon to keep children safe and well	Takes a <i>strengths-based</i> approach
Understand that early intervention and prevention is more cost-effective in the long term than responding to crises, or treating the impacts of abuse and neglect	Aims to make efficient use of resources to enable more <i>sustainable</i> services

For services and practitioners working under the National Framework, it is important to recognise that government and non-government agencies seek to understand how best to balance investments between universal and targeted services, and particularly how cost savings can be delivered through the provision of preventative services (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services & Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA] & the National Framework Implementation Working Group, 2011).

Communities for Children initiative

The Communities for Children⁵ initiative is a large-scale investment from the federal government to ensure that children have the best possible start in life. It reflects a bottom-up, fit-for-purpose approach to child and family services that aims to provide opportunities for the community to address locally identified needs (Lewis & Taylor, 2005).

The initiative adopts targeted early intervention approaches aimed at delivering positive outcomes for young children and their families in disadvantaged communities around Australia. Under the initiative, non-government organisations are funded as “Facilitating Partners” to develop and implement, in consultation with local stakeholders, a strategic and sustainable whole-of-community approach to early childhood development. The premise is that the coordination of services and community engagement are crucial for the effective provision of services (Stronger Families Stronger Communities National Evaluation Consortium, 2008).

Building community capacity through working with children and families

Applying the principles of community capacity-building is one approach to consider in the delivery of child welfare services. Yet demonstrating how those principles can be translated into measurable outcomes for communities is another consideration. This is important for community services that are increasingly being called upon to justify how the funding they receive is being used to deliver outcomes.

In this section, the domains of the Community Capacity Index are used to demonstrate the ways in which some Australian service providers have managed to contribute to the capacity of communities (intentionally or otherwise) through their work with children and families⁶. As described in a previous section, the Index measures community capacity using four broad domains: network partnerships, knowledge transfer, problem solving and infrastructure. This section of the report is structured around these domains.

5 The CFC initiative is delivered as part of the Family Support Program and funded by FaHCSIA <www.fahcsia.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programs-services/family-support-program/family-and-children-s-services#cf>.

6 As previously mentioned, the examples provided in this paper are provided to stimulate further ideas about how services and practitioners might approach their own methods of service delivery. They may not have been the subject of evaluation and may not continue to be operating at the time of publishing

1. Network partnerships

The Index considers network partnerships as the relationships between groups and organisations within a community or network that facilitate the ongoing maintenance and resourcing of programs (Bush, Dower, & Mutch, 2002a). These partnerships are beneficial to families who engage with services that seek to place families in contact with other “formal” community services, such as the Through the Looking Glass initiative and the Partnerships in Early Childhood program (see Box 1). These programs demonstrate the capacity of services to utilise their own network partnerships to benefit families.

Box 1. Linking children and families to the community through network partnerships

Through the Looking Glass: A Community Partnership in Parenting provided intensive psychosocial support, therapeutic assistance and childcare for high-risk families. This was achieved by improving the social connectedness of families by linking them to the childcare community and other local resources. The focus was to strengthen relationships between the mother, clinicians, childcare, primary caregivers and the child. See <www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/profiles/itg_through_looking_glass.html>.

Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC) promoted strong and healthy relationships between families, communities and childcare centre staff. The program aimed to transform childcare centres into dynamic community centres by placing a Child and Family worker to assist children, families and staff. In this way PIEC provided a direct pathway to access information, resources and opportunities that empowered families by enabling them to acquire additional parenting support and address their individual needs as they arose (Commissioner for Children and Young People [CCYP], 2012). See also PIEC Promising Practice Profile <www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/profiles/itg_piec.html>

Community capacity-building approaches focus more on the ability of families to draw support from their own less formal networks within the community. Linking families to the community through informal networks can provide critical forms of support for families at little cost to the community (Chaskin, 2009). For example, the Community Bubs program in Victoria (run by Family Life) is an innovative model of intensive outreach that aims to strengthen the individual, family and community resources so that at-risk infants can thrive and develop safely in the care of their family. The program encourages families to foster networks through the local neighbourhood house to put parents in contact with other parents in their local communities (Flynn & Hewitt, 2007).

Other programs have utilised the potential of informal social networks to provide family support, including the Family by Family initiative (Box 2). This is a good example of how services might help families to access informal support from other families in their community.

Services might consider including assessments of the existing support structures available to families with particular attention to their informal support networks. The aim would be to provide families with the knowledge of who to turn to from within their own networks without having to access more formal community services.

Box 2. Linking families with other families in the community

Family by Family is a program that seeks to reduce the number of families contacting the crisis service system, including child protection. The program aims to enable families to create and sustain desired change by linking them to other families who have undergone similar experiences and who are willing to share their knowledge and skills. “Sharing” families are non-judgemental and they model “thriving behaviours”, such as participating in community events as an example of activities that can help the families to connect with the broader community.

Evaluation of the program demonstrated its effectiveness in bringing about positive changes in personal behaviours and attitudes resulting in longer-term outcomes for their families and children.

See The Australian Centre for Social Inclusion’s co-design approach <www.tacsi.org.au/families/family-by-family/> or *Family by Family: Evaluation Report 2011–2012* (Community Matters, 2012)

2. Knowledge transfer

Community capacity-building approaches recognise the wealth of knowledge and information held by the community (Atkinson & Willis, 2006). For community-led services, gaining access to such knowledge raises three issues:

- How to put in place structural arrangements that can facilitate open exchanges of information with families and other community members?
- What strategies (including engagement strategies) are needed to access the wealth of knowledge among the community in order to effectively respond to family and/or community concerns?
- How can access to community knowledge be used to deliver real outcomes to families and communities?

These considerations are equally important and cannot work in isolation. Box 3 shows how the Gatehouse Project embedded a client-inclusive approach in its program assessment as a way to inform how the program could be structured to deliver appropriate responses to student health.

Box 3. Developing a program structure using client-inclusive assessments

The Gatehouse Project—Participating schools assessed the school social environment (where the “real” knowledge about the school community is held), created action teams and implemented evidence-informed responses to the social development of students. The approach was aimed at enhancing students’ sense of belonging in the school community, and promoted emotional skills for observing and responding to the problems of everyday life. This approach led to improvements in health outcomes for young people, including a reduction in the use of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs (CCYP, 2012, p. 84). See The Gatehouse Project in “Best Practice Programs” <www.cyp.wa.gov.au/buildingblocks/bestpractises.php?bp=Behaviours%20and%20Risks>

Another way for services to connect with families (and thereby gain access to their knowledge base) is through the use of promotional strategies that recognise the particular characteristics of the target client group. For example, the Break O’Day program (Box 4) was able to increase access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families by firstly acknowledging their low levels of literacy and secondly, by knowing where these families gather in the community.

Box 4. Use of targeted promotional strategies to improve client engagement with services

The Break O’Day Health Resource Association promotes its services through carefully worded visual advertisements that use inclusive and non-threatening language in recognition of the low levels of literacy among many families in the area. The Building Blocks parenting program is promoted to new parents in the region by the Child Health and Parenting Nurse, local council, playgroups and local neighbourhood houses and has resulted in increased access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island families. See Building Blocks Program <www.healthyhouse.org.au/healthy_003.htm>.

Other good practice in knowledge transfer has been demonstrated by a number of community-led services, particularly with the use of social media. Box 5 shows some examples of where social media is being used effectively to engage with clients. In some cases, it was simply a matter of removing some of the barriers that previously prevented clients from accessing services.

Box 5. Use of technology to engage clients

Ballarat Community Health—Services offered to young parents use youth-friendly engagement strategies including the use of social media, as it reduces the cost of communication for the young people involved.

Bushmob Media Family Support Program—Bushmob have built relationships with ABC, SBS, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association and Imparja Television. Plans exist to update the Bushmob website so that young people can easily present their own views and material.

Sunshine Coast Family Contact Centre—This Family Contact Centre has developed a plan to use Skype for supervised contact sessions, in order to address transport-related barriers to attend the centre.

Multicultural Council of NT—MyNT is a website that provides a means for young people of migrant and refugee backgrounds to articulate their concerns and inform Darwin’s service providers and policy-makers about their social, recreational and educational needs.

See *Good and Innovative Practice in Service Delivery to Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Families and Children* <www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/papers/a142861/index.html> (Robinson, Scott, Meredith, Nair, & Higgins, 2012).

3. Problem-solving

The Index regards problem-solving as the ability of groups and organisations within a community to adopt methods of identifying and solving problems that arise in the development and implementation of a program (Bush et al., 2002a). In an organisational context, problem-solving is a means through which to help families build the capacity to solve their own problems.

Frameworks that are flexible enough to allow the community to solve their own problems without accessing formal services will have greater capacity to sustain changes over longer periods of time (Bush et al., 2002a; Dower & Bush, 2003). This flexibility lies at the heart of true and enduring community capacity-building efforts as demonstrated in the Yarrabah community in northern Queensland (Box 6). In this case, a community member presented a range of ideas to various groups within the community about ways to improve student retention at the local school. Thanks to the flexibility of the systems in place those community groups were able to provide the collective support needed to adopt the strategies proposed.

Box 6. How communities can solve problems to build their own capacity

A research paper from a Yarrabah community member identified a variety of barriers that impact on children attending school within the community. The paper posed questions for parent/carers, the school and other service providers and prompted stakeholders to find community based solutions and strategies as a matter of priority. As a result, a strategy was developed and targeted towards families within the community who require extra support to get their children to school. A number of approaches were adopted including public rewards for students who showed great attendance, and to recruit four School Community Engagement Officers to work with other major community groups to help promote school attendance—including health, police, council and the justice group.

4. Infrastructure

Infrastructure refers to the level of investment into a community support network by the groups and organisations that make up that network (Bush et al., 2002a), including families and individuals living within the community (Atkinson & Willis, 2006). Investment into four areas of infrastructure is recommended: policy, financial, human/intellectual, and social capital (Bush et al., 2002b). Child and family welfare services can play an important role in each of these areas, although their power to impact on policy and to deliver financial resources may be limited (Dower & Bush, 2003).

Policy investment

Policy investments can be derived from the “top-down”, such as the large-scale investment of the National Framework. In this case, the needs of the child are placed firmly at the centre of the model and “community” is considered the site through which a child’s needs are met (COAG, 2009). The child will already be central to program policies for community-led child welfare services. However,

investments in other service related policies may help practitioners improve their service delivery responses and ultimately play a role in community strengthening (Atkinson & Willis, 2006). For example, programs that adopt a “cultural competence” policy in their service structures (and apply it at all stages of program design, planning, delivery and evaluation) can have benefits for families from specific cultural backgrounds. As Box 7 illustrates, culturally competent policies can help shape the way services are delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Box 7. Developing culturally competent services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

The notion of “cultural competence” means providing services that are sensitive and appropriate to the culture of their clients (Flaxman, Muir, & Oprea, 2009). This means recognising and supporting the right of Indigenous people to promote, develop and maintain Indigenous institutional structures, traditions, customs and practices (Dawe et al., 2006). As Flaxman and colleagues explain,

...culturally competent services consult with and involve family, extended kin, Elders and community members in service delivery, and include structures that are flexible, nonthreatening, informal and low cost. These services also embrace strategies that are culturally tailored, incorporate Indigenous cultural artefacts, teach Indigenous language(s) and offer education and support to parents. (p. 23)

Program evaluations also show that:

- The cultural competence of staff is instrumental in supporting Indigenous families (Flaxman et al., 2009; Munns, 2010; Scougall, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Sivak, Arney, & Lewig, 2008).
- The inclusion of Indigenous mentors in program activities helped to reinforce feelings of cultural connectedness for some participants (Scougall, 2008b).
- Employing Indigenous staff helped some services to better understand client contexts and culture, and offered a different way to communicate with Indigenous families (Munns, 2010; Sivak et al., 2008).
- Sivak and colleagues (2008) found that it was important for families to be offered an Indigenous cultural consultant to facilitate greater understanding between services and their Indigenous clients.

Financial investment

The level of financial investment into a community support network is a key measure of community capacity in the Index (Bush et al., 2002a). For community-led services, the challenge is to source sufficient financial resources to achieve positive outcomes for families (CCCH, 2012). Investments must be justified in terms of the services’ potential to deliver those outcomes, and if services can demonstrate how benefits to families have translated to the broader community, they will be in a better position to sustain their existing funding arrangements, or to secure additional funding.

The ability of services to source financial investments into their programs is a system issue. However, services that consult directly with families and community members about how and where to allocate revenues within the community are reflecting an effective community capacity-building approach.

Human/intellectual investment

Human and/or intellectual investments help service networks to develop the necessary experience and skills to implement and deliver effective responses to community issues (Bush et al., 2002a). These investments extend to education and training initiatives for families and others in the community who need assistance to build the capacity of families to deal with their own issues (Bell et al., 2006; Chaskin, 2009; Community Matters, 2012). Ultimately, investments in human and/or intellectual capacity revolve around the training and education needs of those in the community.

Box 8 illustrates how the Cadets WA Program provides training for young people in their community to build greater leadership capacity. Note that while the program was developed externally (outside of the community), one of the features of the program is to have participants use their newly developed skills to participate in the ongoing development of the program. This reflects a bottom-up approach to program development.

Box 8. Training and development for young people

The **Cadets WA** program is based on the Australian Defence Force Cadets (ADFC) model, and relies on a variety of host organisations based in the community. The program provides opportunities for secondary-school aged young people to participate in fun, structured, intellectually and physically challenging training. Participants of the program were able to use their enhanced practical life skills, leadership skills and greater teamwork capacities to contribute more ideas to help refine the initiative for future participants, and thereby contribute to the programs overall effectiveness (CCYP, 2012, p. 64). See Cadets WA <www.communities.wa.gov.au/cadetswa/Pages/default.aspx>

Social investment

Social investment means developing and maintaining social relations between members of the community and the broader community support network (Bush et al., 2002a). The Advance initiative is a good example of how social capital can be fostered by helping young people to develop supportive personal networks within their community.

Box 9. Developing social capital by assisting young people to develop supportive networks

Advance is a school-based program that provides young people with the opportunity to volunteer or implement a project within their communities in order to foster supportive personal networks and build their social capital. The program is a partnership between the Office for Youth, Victorian Government secondary schools and a range of community organisations. The program encourages communities to foster and appreciate young people's participation and positive role in society, thereby empowering participants and strengthening their communities by forging links that are pivotal to young people's sense of connectedness and belonging (CCYP, 2012, p. 63). See Advance <www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=2058>

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to give those working in the child welfare sector a broad overview of the community capacity-building framework, and has explored ways in which this framework may inform their work with children and families. This paper has highlighted two main ways in which the insights of community capacity-building may be brought into child welfare work:

- Practitioners and policy-makers can reflect upon how the key principles of community capacity-building (e.g., “grassroots”, “bottom-up”, sustainability) might provide a foundation from which to build and refine their own strategies in delivering services to children and families. There is no doubt that many of the principles of community capacity-building have already influenced child welfare work in Australia, most notably through large-scale policy initiatives such as the National Framework and Communities for Children. However, there are still important areas where the child welfare system remains quite narrowly focused on individuals or individual families, and it is here where an awareness of community capacity-building may be most beneficial.
- Service providers can use community capacity-building measures, such as the Community Capacity Index, to ensure that their work with children and families acknowledges the intimate connection between the wellbeing of families and the health of the communities in which they reside. This paper has provided examples of service providers whose work with children and families has also contributed to strengthening important components of community capacity, such as network partnerships, knowledge transfer, problem solving and infrastructure.

The practices and goals of those in the child welfare sector and those in the community development sector (who use community capacity-building approaches) are in many ways very similar. First, the

common goal is to achieve sustainable responses to the concerns of children, families and the broader community. Second, both sectors require collaborative approaches to deliver certain outcomes for families and communities. Third, focusing on the actual needs of families and communities should be central to each approach. Finally, building flexible system structures that facilitate clear avenues of communication (to better understand the needs of clients and communities) will help to improve child and family wellbeing as well as enhance community capacity.

In the current policy context, where communities are increasingly acknowledged as a primary influence on child and family wellbeing, services would be well advised to demonstrate how their work with children and families is contributing to strengthened communities more broadly. If services can do this, they may be better placed to secure additional funding for their work. And, most importantly, by reflecting upon their practice in this way, it is likely they will provide services that are more effective and sustainable in the long term.

Further reading

Understanding the concept of community capacity-building

- Noya, A., Clarence, E., & Craig, G. (Eds). (2009). *Community capacity-building: Creating a better future together*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
 - Outlines the key themes, dimensions and principles of community capacity-building from an international perspective of sustainable community development.
- Atkinson, R. & Willis, P. (2006). *Community capacity-building: A practical guide*. Hobart: University of Tasmania, Housing and Community Research Unit.
 - Outlines the key stages of community capacity-building, effective steps to ensure good practice and how to include evaluation.
- Jackson, S. F., Cleverly, S., Poland, B., Burman, D., Edwards, R., & Robertson, A. (2003). Working with Toronto neighbourhoods toward developing indicators of community capacity. *Health Promotion International*, 18(4), 339–350.
 - Provides a model and definition of community capacity-building based on findings from a public health project in Toronto. The article also provides indicators to measure overall community capacity and its facilitators and barriers with examples of possible measures.
- Simpson, L., Wood, L., & Daws, L. (2003). Community capacity-building: Starting with people not projects. *Community Development Journal*, 38(4), 277–286.
 - Debates the pressures on the community to take control of development initiatives mainly from a resources perspective.

Community capacity-building in the context of child wellbeing

- Wright, S. (2004). Child protection in the community: A community development approach. *Child Abuse Review*, 13(6), 384–339.
 - Discusses strategies to mobilise local resources and community engagement to enhance children's safety from an ecological perspective of child development and safety and the need to address issues such as social isolation.
- Chaskin, R. J. (2009). Building community capacity for children, youth, and families. *Children Australia*, 34(1), 31–39.
 - Presents ways to consider community as an organising principle to address social issues and developmental needs of children and families. This is followed by a discussion of the components of community capacity and strategies to build capacity.
- Barter, K. (2007). Enough is enough: Building community capacity to transform child protection. *Journal of Child and Youth Care*, 20(1), 37–44.

- Argues that community capacity-building is responsive and comprehensive, not only with respect to protective interventions with children and families, but also the many complex issues associated with child protection.

The Community Capacity Index

- Bush, R., Dower, J., & Mutch A. (2002). *The Community Capacity Index*. Brisbane: Centre for Primary Health Care, The University of Queensland.
- Bush, R., Dower, J., & Mutch A. (2002). *The Community Capacity Index Manual*. Brisbane: Centre for Primary Health Care, The University of Queensland.
- Dower, J. & Bush, R. (2003). *Critical Success Factors in Community Capacity-building*. Brisbane: Centre for Primary Health Care, The University of Queensland.
 - The study on a public health project in Queensland outlines the dimension of Community Capacity Index, the factors to build community capacity, to locate the process in the context of policy and measures to evaluate.
- Bell, C., Elliott, E., & Simmons, A. (2010). Community capacity-building. In E. Waters, B. Swinburn, J. Seidell, & R. Uauy (Eds), *Preventing childhood obesity: Evidence, policy and practice* (pp. 232–242). Chichester, England: Wiley Blackwell.
 - Debates the need to measure community capacity and explains the use of the Community Capacity Index as an evaluation tool to measure capacity-building.

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